

SECURITY / ESSAY

Naravane's Moment of Truth

An army chief's unpublished memoir exposes how the Modi government spun the China border crisis



General Manoj Mukund Naravane was chief of the army staff from December 2019 until April 2022.
SONU MEHTA/HT PHOTO

SUSHANT SINGH

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LIEUTENANT GENERAL YOGESH JOSHI, the chief of the Indian Army's Northern Command, received a phone call at 8.15 pm on 31 August 2020. The information he received alarmed him. Four Chinese tanks, supported by infantry, had begun moving up a steep mountain track towards Rechin La in eastern Ladakh. Joshi reported the movement to the chief of army staff, General Manoj Mukund Naravane, who immediately grasped the severity of the situation. The tanks were within a few hundred metres of Indian positions on the Kailash Range, the strategic high ground that Indian forces had seized, hours earlier, in a dangerous race with China's People's Liberation Army. In this terrain on the disputed Line of Actual Control—the de facto border between the two countries—every metre of elevation translates to strategic dominance.

The Indian soldiers fired an illuminating round, a kind of warning shot. It had no effect. The Chinese kept advancing. Naravane began making frantic calls to the leaders of India's political and military establishment, including Rajnath Singh, the defence minister; Ajit Doval, the national security advisor; General Bipin Rawat, the chief of defence staff; and S Jaishankar, the minister of external affairs. "To each and every one my question was, 'What are my orders?'" Naravane writes in his as-yet-unpublished memoir, *Four Stars of Destiny*.

The situation was deteriorating dramatically and demanded clarity. There was an existing protocol. Naravane had clear orders not to open fire "till cleared from the very top." His superiors did not give any clear directive. Minutes ticked by. At 9.10 pm, Joshi called again. The Chinese tanks continued to advance and were now less than a kilometre from the pass. At 9.25 pm, Naravane called Rajnath again, asking "for clear directions." None came.

Meanwhile, a message arrived from the PLA commander, Major General Liu Lin. He proposed a cooling down of sorts: both sides should stop

further movement, and local commanders would meet at the pass at 9.30 am the following morning, with three representatives each. It seemed like a reasonable proposition. For a moment, it appeared that an off-ramp was emerging. At 10 pm, Naravane called Rajnath and Doval to relay this message.

Ten minutes later, Northern Command rang again. The Chinese tanks had not stopped. They were now only five hundred metres from the top. Naravane recalls Joshi saying that the “only way to stop them was by opening up with our own medium artillery, which he said was ready and waiting.” Artillery duels were routine on the Line of Control with Pakistan, where divisional and corps commanders had been delegated the authority to fire hundreds of rounds per day without asking anyone up the chain. But this was China. This was different. An artillery duel with the PLA could escalate into something far larger.

“My position was critical,” Naravane writes. He was caught between “the Command who wanted to open fire with all possible means” and a government committee “which had yet to give me clear-cut executive orders.” In the operations room at army headquarters, options were being considered and discarded. The entire Northern Front was on high alert. Areas of likely clash were being monitored. But the decision point was at Rechin La.

Naravane made yet another call to the defence minister, who promised to call back. Time stretched. Each minute was a minute closer to Chinese tanks reaching the top. Rajnath called back at 10.30 pm. He had spoken to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose instructions consisted of a single sentence: “*Jo uchit samjho, woh karo*”—do whatever you deem appropriate. This was to be “purely a military decision.” Modi had been consulted. He had been briefed. But he had declined to make the call. “I had been handed a hot potato,” Naravane recalls. “With this *carte blanche*, the onus was now totally on me.”

It was a moment of profound isolation. Naravane sat “with the map of J & K and Ladakh on one wall, Eastern Command on another.” He could

visualise “the location of each and every unit and formation” even on the unmarked maps. A hundred different thoughts flashed through his mind. The country was reeling under COVID-19. The economy was faltering. Global supply chains had fractured. “Would we be able to ensure a steady supply of spares, etc., under these conditions, in case of a long-drawn-out action? Who were our supporters in the global arena, and what about the collusive threat from China and Pakistan?”

They had the requisite reserves, he concluded. “We were ready in all respects,” Naravane writes, “but did I really want to start a war?”

GOING TO WAR can never be a purely military decision. It is taken by democratically elected political leadership. During the 1999 Kargil conflict, under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, every action was debated and approved in meetings of the cabinet committee on security—India’s final decision-making body on national security, chaired by the prime minister. Memoirs from that period show the CCS being able to own its decisions and issue clear directives to military commanders. The same was true of Indira Gandhi during the 1971 war that led to the liberation of Bangladesh.

But, in August 2020, according to Naravane’s account, there was neither any authorisation to fire nor any restriction. No guardrails. No contingency framework. By handing such a monumental decision to the army, the prime minister had effectively abdicated the responsibility of initiating, or avoiding, a military conflict with China. It is not the army chief’s role to weigh India’s political and economic situation, assess potential US diplomatic backing, factor in the COVID-19 crisis, or calculate the risk of Pakistan and China combining forces. Those assessments are meant to be made by the government. Political instructions to the military on such matters must be precise and unambiguous, not reduced to a vague injunction to act at one’s discretion.

Modi’s abdication stands in sharp contrast to the public image he has cultivated since 2014. In limited skirmishes with Pakistan, the Indian media—and later films and web series—have portrayed him as a bold, decisive, hands-on leader. Modi himself has claimed that he personally cleared the

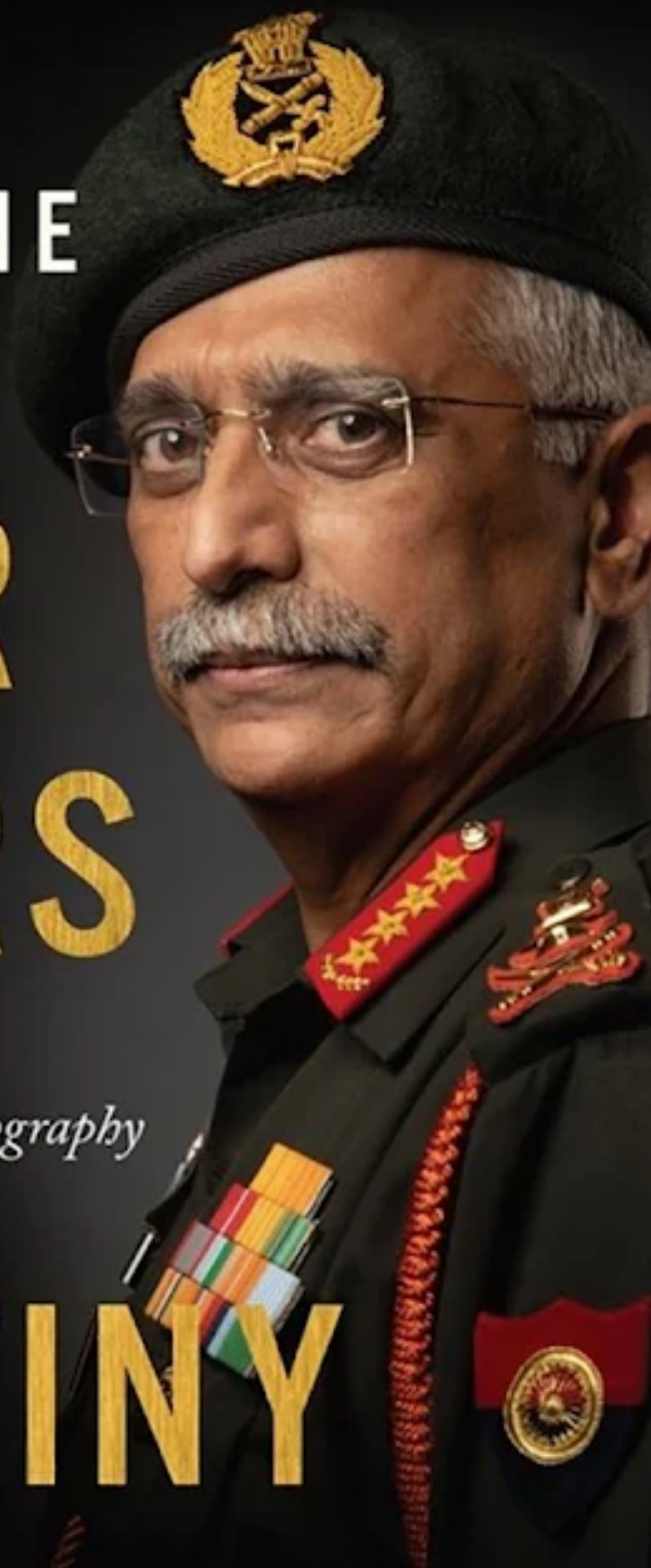
Balakot air strikes, in February 2019, despite poor weather, suggesting that the air force could take advantage of cloud cover to “escape the radar” of the enemy. The Modi government did enough Pakistan-bashing and used the Central Reserve Police Force troops killed in Pulwama to successfully campaign for a second term. China does not lend itself to such grandstanding. It is, in all respects, a far more formidable antagonist. But, for a government deeply invested in narrative control, Naravane’s account poses a serious problem.

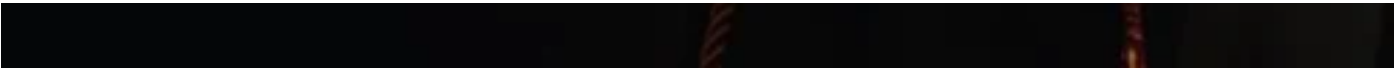
GENERAL MANOJ MUKUND NARAVANE

*Former Chief of Army Staff
of the Indian Army*

FOUR STARS OF DESTINY

An Autobiography





Four Stars of Destiny, published by Penguin, was supposed to go to press in April 2024.

Four Stars of Destiny, a typescript of which has been seen by *The Caravan*, was supposed to go to press in April 2024. The blurb by its publisher, Penguin Books, provides a fairly anodyne pitch, describing the army chief's career experiences. "General Naravane shares lessons on leadership and management with universal applicability, and gives us an insider's perspective on what else needs to be done to make the Armed Forces a more potent instrument of national power, ready to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century," it states. "Naravane's life and career illustrate the strength and resilience required to overcome adversity, and the importance of family and maintaining a work-life balance—something that has been lost sight of in today's 24×7 work culture." Extracts from the book were published by the Press Trust of India, in December 2023, while advance orders were taken by Amazon and other online retailers. Then, the whole process stalled.

In October 2025, when asked about the matter at the Khushwant Singh Literature Festival, Naravane said that the publishers were still waiting on reviews from the defence ministry. "It is still under review for more than a year now." I reached out to the publishers, Naravane and the ministry of defence, but received no response.

It is not difficult to see why a candid account of Naravane's tenure would put the government on edge. Naravane served as army chief between December 2019 and April 2022—one of the most consequential periods in recent military history. His tenure coincided with intense political centralisation in Modi's second term and some of the clearest signs yet of the armed forces' politicisation. By the time he took over, Article 370 of the Constitution, which gave partial autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir, had already been unilaterally revoked; and the Balakot crisis had been falsely portrayed by the Modi government as a victory. Naravane would go on to be blindsided by the Agnipath scheme—a short-term contractual scheme for soldiers—which was later announced abruptly, against the wishes of the service chiefs.

Most crucially, Naravane presided over the June 2020 Galwan clash in which India lost 20 soldiers and control over significant territory—the details of which can be found in my cover story for this magazine in October 2022. These were the first military deaths in a clash on the India–China border in Ladakh since the 1962 war, triggering a public-relations crisis for the Modi government and casting a long shadow on bilateral relations. Further, given that this situation had been brewing since May 2020, it seems particularly egregious that events that transpired just a few months later, in August, should have been treated so cavalierly by the political establishment.

In the absence of any official confirmation, it is difficult to quantify the territorial gains made by China in eastern Ladakh since May 2020. The activist Sonam Wangchuk's wife has claimed that “China is not only occupying our land but also coming deeper inside Indian territory every year” and that, when Wangchuk wanted to visit these areas in 2024 and 2025, “curfew was imposed, internet shut down and he was physically stopped.”

By agreeing to create buffer zones and run coordinated patrols, India has conceded ground to China, with grave implications for any future border settlement. India is not in a position to reverse these gains, although the government has variously claimed that no territory has been lost or that some territory has been regained or that it has forced China to back down. Ashok Kantha, a former ambassador to China, told the *Indian Express* that “if these arrangements become permanent, the Chinese side would have partially achieved incremental changes.”

Naravane's memoir revisits many of these events in considerable detail. It recounts decisions made in real time during dramatically escalating tensions, lays out the logic and limits of disengagement on the LAC and details Chinese actions that crossed Indian “red lines” at Doklam, even as New Delhi struggled to manage the situation in Bhutan. Taken together, it offers a rare window into how the political–military relationship functions under the Modi government—and how far official narratives diverged from events on the ground.

Throughout the unfolding crisis, it was not as though Modi was unaware of India's military options. Naravane notes that, early in the crisis, he assured the political leadership that the army had prepared retaliatory options "not only in Eastern Ladakh but all across the Northern Front." He writes that he briefed Modi whenever summoned. The prime minister's office, he adds, would sometimes seek agenda points even when meetings were initiated by Modi himself.

To be clear, at no point does Naravane criticise Modi. On the contrary, his memoir is replete with praise, often for minor gestures. Naravane recounts admiringly how Modi once pointed out that only essential lights were kept on in his office—an observation that "immediately struck a chord" with him. Even when hinting at friction, Naravane remains quietly restrained: "I would brief the CCS numerous times, though the last meeting that I attended in March 2022 was not so pleasant." The timing suggests that this referred to discussions around the Agnipath scheme, which Naravane had opposed in its proposed form.

Yet, for all his discretion, the memoir raises unsettling questions about how little Indians know about the Ladakh crisis. Naravane's account of the events leading to the Galwan clash settles some debates while opening larger ones. His disclosures about disengagement, buffer zones—and so-called "friction points" many of which remain in place—are of lasting significance, as are the detailed revelations about the severe restrictions on opening fire and the deployment on the Kailash range in August 2020, which the Modi government would later project as a proactive operation rather than a reaction to another Chinese attempt to grab territory. The government has not held a detailed press conference on these developments, nor has the parliamentary standing committee on defence debated them.



Chinese and Indian soldiers during a clash in the Galwan Valley on 15 June 2020. SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST

It is hard to escape the impression that the Modi government is hiding a lot of facts from the public—because it has a lot to hide. Naravane's manuscript has been around for over two years, yet the media has made little effort to interrogate its revelations. This reticence is even more telling after October 2024, when the Modi government made significant concessions to China to project a return to normalcy in bilateral ties, despite the unresolved reality along the disputed border.

It is precisely because Galwan and its aftermath were so thoroughly obscured by official messaging, amplified by a largely unquestioning media, that Naravane's memoir matters. It sheds light on Chinese aggression, the decisions that led to the loss of Indian lives and territory, and the troubling absence of political accountability at a moment when the country stood on the brink of war.

AS NARAVANE CONTEMPLATED ordering artillery fire on the advancing Chinese tanks, the opening shot that could expand the Ladakh crisis into full-fledged warfare, he sat in silence. "All was quiet save for the ticking of the wall clock," he writes. He thought of all the preparations made since June—the supplies, the training, the rotation of fresh troops,

the induction of mechanised forces despite the difficult terrain—that had led to this moment. It was not a war game being played on a sand model. This was a life-and-death situation for thousands of soldiers who would follow whatever order he gave in the next few minutes.

After a few moments, Naravane made his decision. “We cannot be the first ones to fire,” he told Joshi. To do so would hand the Chinese a justification, a “*casus belli*,” to escalate the situation by claiming victimhood. This calculation was deliberate and strategic.

Instead of opening fire, Naravane ordered Joshi to deploy tanks “right to the forward slopes of the Pass” and position them nose-down, so that their main guns were physically pointing straight at the PLA armour at close range. This would make it clear that any further Chinese advance would be directly targeted. This, to his mind, was maximum deterrence without crossing the firing threshold, signalling a readiness to fight while technically remaining within the no-fire posture. The order was executed immediately, he writes, “and the PLA tanks, which had by then reached within a few hundred metres of the top, stopped in their tracks. Their light tanks would have been no match for our medium tanks. It was a game of bluff and the PLA blinked first.”

The crisis had not ended, but the moment of maximum danger had passed. By the following morning, both sides agreed to flag meetings at the Chushul–Moldo meeting point. The situation on the Kailash Range had just about been handled, and India had even gained some tactical advantage. This, too, would be spun by policy circles as India’s pre-planned retaliation to China’s aggression in Galwan, instead of another disaster narrowly averted.

{TWO}

ACCORDING TO NARAVANE, the Galwan clash was not a sudden or unforeseen episode but the culmination of weeks of escalating Chinese aggression. Local commanders were, he writes, “underprepared” and sought to “underplay the situation.” He suggests that eastern Ladakh was not a high-priority theatre for India’s security establishment. For instance,

when Naravane himself undertook his first visit to Leh as army chief, in January 2020, he did not travel to eastern Ladakh at all, having been called back to Delhi after visiting Siachen “due to a sudden requirement to go to Bhutan.”

The first week of May 2020 saw “a few tense face-offs with the PLA” in eastern Ladakh. On 5 May, one such incident took place at Patrolling Point 14 in Galwan, foreshadowing what was to come. Much of the competing claims made by India and China along the LAC—across vast stretches of inhospitable and uninhabited terrain—are asserted through patrolling by soldiers, the construction of observation posts and other infrastructure, and control over grazing grounds. The Galwan River flows from east to west, joining the Shyok River near the Indian outpost on the Darbuk–Shyok–Daulat Beg Oldie road. From there, Indian patrols would move upriver towards PP-14, roughly ten kilometres away as the crow flies but far longer on foot, requiring multiple river crossings. The terrain made it difficult to complete patrols in a single day.

About a kilometre short of PP-14, a small seasonal rivulet flowing north to south joins the Galwan River. “After crossing this junction, it was relatively easy to go up to PP-14,” Naravane notes. “Just south and east of this junction was a flattish piece of ground which could also be developed into a helipad.” For the Indian side, the alternatives to avoid a multi-day patrol “were either to establish a temporary observation post at PP-14, which would have been in violation of protocols, or construct a motorable track as far forward as possible, at least till the nala river junction.” Army engineers had already begun work on such a track in the summer of 2020, including the construction of bridges. These construction parties later appeared in videos released by Chinese state television to portray India as the aggressor.

The PLA, by contrast, had no road connectivity to PP-14 from their post near Galwan, some twenty-five kilometres to the east, “except for a natural surface track,” which they, too, were improving. The initial clash in early May occurred under these circumstances, after which the Chinese “remained encamped a few kilometres away to the east.” By this point, the PLA had not only objected to Indian patrols reaching PP-14 but had begun

insisting on patrolling up to the nullah junction—an unprecedented demand that India “firmly and categorically denied.”

On 6 May, during a CCS meeting at the prime minister’s residence—convened to discuss the situation created by Chinese actions at Doklam—Naravane “brought to everyone’s attention [the] emerging situation in Eastern Ladakh.” As the prime minister’s special representative on China, Doval was expected to speak to the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, about Doklam. Naravane suggested that “this latest provocation at PP-14 could also be brought up.” The suggestion was rejected. “At that point in time,” he notes, “the situation emerging in Doklam was the graver, and the face-off at PP-14 was a mere blip on the radar screen.”



Chinese troops dismantling their bunkers at Pangong Tso region along the India-China border, on 15 February 2021. INDIAN ARMY / AP PHOTO

That “blip” had nearly been missed altogether. Naravane calls it “providential” that the army detected the move at all—Joshi, accompanied

by the corps commander, Lieutenant General Harinder Singh, happened to be on an aerial reconnaissance mission when they spotted what Naravane describes as a “surreptitious build-up.” Naravane writes that he then mobilised Indian forces, leading to a face-off that continued through the night, “with lots of jostling and fisticuffs.”

Joshi offers a slightly different account in his own memoir. He writes that he was flying by helicopter in the region when he saw a PLA helicopter “coming towards us from the opposite side” in the Galwan Valley. Surprised that it appeared to have crossed the LAC, Joshi asked his pilot to hold position. But the moment the PLA helicopter spotted the Indian aircraft, he writes, it “turned around and returned back across the LAC.” The episode was small but telling—an early indication that the Chinese were probing Indian defences both in the air and on the ground through May.

The statement issued on 20 June by China’s foreign ministry claimed that something serious had transpired on 6 May. That morning, it stated, “the Indian border troops, who have crossed the LAC by night and trespassed into China’s territory, have built fortification and barricades, which impeded the patrol of Chinese border troops. They deliberately made provocations in an attempt to unilaterally change the status quo of control and management. The Chinese border troops have been forced to take necessary measures to respond to the situation on the ground and strengthen management and control in the border areas.”

A few days after the PP-14 clash, there was another one on the north bank of the Pangong Lake, Naravane writes, which saw more scuffles and “even stone-throwing, resulting in minor injuries to both sides.” Around the same time, there was a face-off at Naku La in Sikkim. “All of these,” Naravane concludes, “were the result of aggressive behaviour on the part of the PLA, which seemed to be looking for a fight.”

By mid-May, the probing evolved into something far more serious. In what Naravane describes as “an extremely unusual move,” the PLA established positions at PP-15 and PP-17A in considerable strength, deploying “fifteen to twenty Armoured Personnel Carriers, heavy vehicles including dozers,

and troops in the hundreds.” These were areas where, in the past, both sides had conducted routine patrols before withdrawing to permanent bases. “This area (Gogra/Hot Springs) had never been contested in the past,” Naravane writes. “This sudden escalation was unprecedented as well as unwarranted.”

On the north bank of Pangong, Chinese aggression took a different form. The lake stretches for roughly a hundred and sixty kilometres, with about a third in India and the remaining two-thirds in Tibet. The northern shore is cut by ridges that descend into the lake—Fingers 1 to 8 from the Indian side. The LAC here is neither delineated nor demarcated. Indian patrols traditionally went up to Finger 8, while the PLA came till Finger 4, Naravane writes, “with either side contesting this activity and lodging protests at the appropriate level. At times, this too would result in the proverbial face-off and resultant jostling and pushing.”

On 18 and 19 May, Indian patrols encountered PLA forces in areas traditionally contested between Finger 4 and Finger 8. This time, however, “a large column of vehicles suddenly appeared from the direction of Sirijap Fort,” carrying not the usual Border Defence Regiment troops but regular PLA soldiers “in full combat gear.” They were equipped with riot shields, batons, barbed-wire-studded clubs and pyrotechnics. Faced with this sudden show of force, Naravane writes, the outnumbered Indian soldiers, despite resisting, were pushed back west of Finger 4. Several of them were injured, and reported the loss of controlled stores and damage to radio equipment. When Naravane visited Leh to assess the situation, it did not leave him with a “favourable impression.”

In fact, Naravane is damning in his indictment of the commanders in Ladakh—presumed to be the corps and division commanders, though he does not name them. “The Commanders were trying to reason why they had been underprepared,” he writes. “Once is fine, but to be underprepared on the second and subsequent occasions was just not acceptable.” He adds that there appeared to be “a lack of information-sharing within the formation and attempts to underplay the situation.” Going by Naravane’s

account, it seems clear that had this been addressed through disciplinary action, it might have altered what followed at Galwan.

In Delhi, meetings of the CCS and the China Study Group—an informal group of top officials, headed by Doval—followed. The prevailing sentiment, Naravane notes, was that India had to do “something.” But, he adds, “Something doesn’t happen overnight.” The scale and timing of the PLA build-up, he argues, ruled out the possibility that it was the initiative of local commanders or even the Western Command. The operation, he believed, needed “blessings right from the very top,” a phrase that, in the Chinese context, could only refer to President Xi Jinping.

The army, Naravane writes, “immediately launched” Operation Snow Leopard, inducting reserve formations that were already prepared to move. Joshi, however, uses the same name to describe the August 2020 operations across the Rechin La, on both banks of the Pangong Lake, and further north at Kiu La and Ane La. Unlike Naravane, Joshi insists that, since Operation Snow Leopard is still ongoing, its details cannot be discussed “in the interest of national security.” He promises a full account in a sequel, “at a suitable time later, and when it’s approved by the authorities”—an outcome that appears unlikely under the present government.

A MEETING OF BRIGADE COMMANDERS was held at Galwan in the second week of May. Both sides agreed to restore the status quo ante, but, Naravane recalls, “as the deliberations were winding down,” the PLA made an unexpected request. Since it was getting late, and their main location was far away, they asked permission “to pitch two tents in the vicinity of the Junction as a temporary arrangement only.” The Indian commander said that “he would consider this request and would have to consult his superiors on it.” The two sides broke off “just as dusk was setting in.”

After making “a show of going back,” the Chinese “returned with two tents, pitched them up, and presented us with a fait accompli.” Naravane believes this was a premeditated tactic, one that would “become a recurring feature in the negotiations,” with the PLA assuming their proposals had been accepted when they had merely been “heard.”

When Naravane learnt of the episode the next morning, he “immediately turned it down,” only to be told that the tents had already been pitched. He writes that he was “quite unhappy at this turn of events,” as was Doval when Naravane reported the matter to him. Naravane felt that “the PLA should be asked to move back forthwith.”

Northern Command, however, argued that the location was unsuitable for camping and that the tents would be submerged once water levels of the river rose in the summer. “I wasn’t entirely convinced,” Naravane writes, “but since this had been the first HMCL”—higher military command-level meeting—“and the beginning of the disengagement process, this was grudgingly acceded to, especially since the tents had been pitched.” Army headquarters repeatedly told Northern Command to stress the temporary nature of the arrangement and to press for withdrawal. Yet, in what Naravane frames as a damning failure of judgment, “The Command and Corps insisted that it was not an issue and they could get it vacated at any time.” The assumption would prove dangerously wrong.



Tanks pull back from the banks of Pangong Tso region, in Ladakh along the Line of Actual Control, on 10 February 2021. INDIAN ARMY / AP PHOTO

The Chinese statement in June does not mention tents in its version of events: “In response to the strong demand of the Chinese side, India agreed to withdraw the personnel who crossed the LAC and demolish the facilities, and so they did. On June 6, the border troops of both countries held a commander-level meeting and reached consensus on easing the situation. The Indian side promised that they would not cross the estuary of the Galwan river to patrol and build facilities and the two sides would discuss and decide phased withdrawal of troops through the meetings between commanders on the ground.”

Flag-level meetings continued at PP-15 and PP-17A, where troops fell back over agreed distances, reducing the likelihood of violent encounters. At PP-14 in Galwan, however, the situation remained tense. Each time Indian commanders asked the PLA to remove their tents, the Chinese shifted ground—first saying they needed more time, then that they would “check with our superiors” and finally claiming the matter was “beyond the mandate of the talks.” From this pattern of stonewalling, Naravane concludes, “it became evident that there had been no intention of removing those tents in the first place.”

India responded by deciding to pitch its own tents in the same general area. Naravane does not specify who took the decision or whether it was discussed within the CCS. When Indian troops moved to implement it, “there was a violent reaction from their side.” Colonel Santosh Babu, the commanding officer of the 16 Bihar Regiment, “went forward with a small party of troops to attempt to defuse the situation.” The PLA was “in no mood to relent” and attacked Babu’s party. What followed, Naravane writes, was “a free-for-all.”

As darkness fell, both sides rushed in reinforcements. “A see-saw engagement continued throughout the night.” Although armed, neither side opened fire, relying instead on batons, clubs, and stones hurled or rolled down slopes. The difference in terrain and connectivity on both sides proved decisive. “Due to better connectivity on their side, the PLA were able to move troops forward in APCs, which changed the balance in their favour.”

The official citation for Babu's posthumous Maha Vir Chakra states that, during Operation Snow Leopard, he was tasked with establishing an observation post "in face of the enemy." He "successfully executed the task" and, "undaunted by the violent and aggressive action by overwhelming strength of enemy soldiers," continued to resist efforts to push Indian troops back. This version sits uneasily with Naravane's account of Babu being sent to "defuse the situation."

Another account appears on the memorial constructed by the army at the KM-120 post. Its inscription reads that, on 15 June, Babu led a Quick Reaction Force "tasked to evict the PLA OP from Gen A Y Nala and move further to Patrolling Point 14." It claims the column evicted the PLA post, reached PP-14 and then engaged in "a fierce skirmish," during which Babu led from the front in hand-to-hand combat, inflicting heavy casualties on the PLA before 20 Indian soldiers were killed. To this tangle of overlapping and contradictory official narratives has since been added a film starring Salman Khan, *Battle of Galwan*, scheduled for release in April. The official Chinese claim was that "India's front-line troops, in violation of the agreement reached at the commander-level meeting, once again crossed the Line of Actual Control for deliberate provocation when the situation in the Galwan Valley was already easing, and even violently attacked the Chinese officers and soldiers who went there for negotiation, thus triggering fierce physical conflicts and causing casualties."

At around 1.30 am on 16 June, Joshi called Naravane to brief him on the unfolding situation. He warned that there were likely fatalities, "including perhaps the CO himself." Despite the sobering news, Naravane told Joshi that "we must hit back this time at least, and make them pay the price for their misadventure."

Daylight brought grim news. Soldiers who had been separated during the night began to trickle back. Five had died from injuries sustained in the confrontation. As the head count was taken that morning, many were initially listed as missing. "As tense negotiations began," Naravane writes, "many of our boys, who had either got disoriented or had been briefly detained by the PLA without food or medical aid, returned to base."

However, fifteen of them succumbed to the combined effects of their injuries and hypothermia. It was one of the saddest days of my entire career ... losing twenty men in a day was hard to bear.”

Scores of Indian soldiers were in Chinese custody, and the last lot of ten soldiers, including four officers, were released after three days. India stayed silent about these soldiers, while negotiating for their quiet return, but the PLA subsequently released the videos and pictures of Indian soldiers and weapons in their captivity. Naravane does not provide the exact numbers but confirms that “our men who were in Chinese hands” were “subjected to a fresh round of beatings” without provocation. To date, the Modi government has neither acknowledged the abuse nor issued any demarche to the Chinese for this ill-treatment of Indian soldiers.

Naravane also disputes the official PLA numbers. “Our men who were in Chinese hands had been kept out in the open and they had seen several bodies being fished out of the river. Whenever that happened, they were subjected to a fresh round of beatings. The sheer savagery of their response was in itself indicative of the losses they had suffered.” Indian media has tried to highlight some reports, of Australian and Russian origin, that suggest greater PLA casualties, but those have never been validated or confirmed. In February 2021, China officially acknowledged four PLA fatalities and bestowed honours on some of those who had been injured or killed. It framed the incident as a defensive response to “illegal trespassing,” carefully avoiding references to India and instead using the term “foreign military.”

On 17 June 2020, Jaishankar spoke to his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi. “The Chinese side took pre-meditated and planned action that was directly responsible for the resulting violence and casualties,” his ministry said. “It reflected an intent to change the facts on ground in violation of all our agreements to not change the status quo.” Two days later, however, Modi claimed at an all-party meeting that “*Na wahan koi hamari seema mein ghus gaya hai aur na hi koi ghusa hua hai, na hi hamari koi post kisi doosre ke kabze mein hai*”—no intrusion occurred and no posts were captured. The statement contradicted the foreign ministry’s account and was later echoed

awkwardly by official clarifications. China promptly used Modi's remarks internationally to validate its position, undercutting India's own case about Chinese forces crossing the LAC. Attempts by the prime minister's office to walk back the statement came too late.

In retrospect, Naravane describes Galwan as a turning point. "For the first time in over two decades," he writes, "the PLA had suffered fatal casualties." He claims, somewhat grandly, that it "took India and the Indian Army to show to the world that enough is enough and to challenge the neighbourhood bully." Whatever the merits of that claim, the real value of Naravane's memoir lies elsewhere: in the clarity it brings to events long obscured by official evasion. In place of evidence, parliament has been offered only opaque assurances, such as Jaishankar's statement that the "house is well aware of the circumstances leading up to the violent clashes in Galwan Valley." It was not. Every single parliamentary question on Galwan was denied in the name of national security.

{THREE}

THE EVENTS OF AUGUST 2020, when Naravane was told to do as he deemed fit, should not have come out of left field. The Galwan crisis had already "created a stir in the politico-military establishment," Naravane writes, adding that, while there was no surprise at the strategic level, they were "surprised at the ground level." He argues that these tactical surprises are "something which is bound to happen with whoever seizes the initiative." The Indians were "unable to gauge the true 'intention' in a timely manner," he adds, "due to a lack of adequate Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capability at the tactical level." Even in December 2025, Indians officials told *The Economist* that real-time coverage from satellites remains spotty and that they "can't look consistently deep into China."



China and India are pulling back frontline troops from disputed portions on the banks of the Pangong lake on 15 February 2021. INDIAN ARMY / AP PHOTO

Naravane describes a race against time, beginning in the intervening night of 29 and 30 August 2020. The PLA had moved troops from its base in Moldo to the Chuti Changla area, towards the southern bank of the Pangong Lake. This was after the Chinese had categorically conveyed, that morning, “that in the interest of stability, there should be ‘no mountain manoeuvres,’ especially at night.” Having sent that message, “probably to lull us into a false sense of security, that is precisely what they did the same night itself.” Naravane’s words for this: “Such perfidy!”

In the face of these provocations, Naravane writes, “we too had to carry out some actions to make the PLA rethink their creeping tactics and teach them a lesson.” The decision was approved at a China Study Group meeting, advanced by a day at Naravane’s request, at 11.30 am on 30 August. The orders were passed to Joshi, “even while the meeting was in progress,” he pointedly notes, “before anybody could change their mind.” The attendees

at the CSG meeting included Rajnath, Doval and Jaishankar. It is worth noting that this was not a CCS meeting chaired by the prime minister but the meeting of an informal group that has no constitutional or legal authority to take sovereign decisions.

At the start of the CSG meeting, “the question of whether or not to open fire remained hanging,” Naravane writes. The army, which had been criticised heavily for not opening fire when it lost 20 soldiers in the Galwan clash, argued that “protocols are fine, but if they are being violated, then they become null and void.” Naravane adds that it was “because of these protocols and the belief that we will not open fire, that the PLA was coming forward in large numbers in a non-tactical manner, reminiscent of their human-wave tactics.” The Indian Army was rightly worried that, if “this were to recur and our own positions were overrun, then the question would again be asked as to why, if we were armed, were we not opening fire in the face of such blatant acts of aggression.”

“After much debate, it was agreed upon that as a last resort, if our own physical security was at stake, that detachment and that detachment alone, could open fire in self-defence,” Naravane writes, stating the very strict limitations—only as a last resort, only in case physical security is threatened and only by that group and no one else—given to the frontline soldiers. This is contrary to the Modi government’s preferred narrative of a free hand given to the soldiers.

“Given the circumstances, our troops were on high alert and had monitored this entire move,” Naravane writes. “The assessment was that the PLA would try and repeat what they had done on the North Bank and try to occupy dominating features on their perception of the LAC. We had been alive to this possibility and as soon as we came to know of this development, Northern Command immediately decided to move troops up and pre-empt the PLA.” Indian forces were moving to block Chinese occupation, not to retaliate against the PLA’s actions in May. “The plans had been deliberated upon earlier and troops had been earmarked for the purpose,” Naravane adds, but execution came only when the threat became real.

After the CSG meeting, Indian forces moved to occupy multiple strategic positions: north of Pangong, they seized Finger 4 and the passes of Ane La and Kiu La, while on the south bank, they took Rezang La and Rechin La, dominating the Spanggur Gap from a height of 4,350 metres. “We definitely caught the PLA with their pants down,” Naravane writes.

That evening, Naravane notes, “in the area of Gurung Hill on the South bank, one JCO of 7 VIKAS (Special Frontier Force), Nyima Tenzin, was killed when he stepped on a vintage mine while rallying his troops.”

The SFF is a covert-operations unit, established in November 1962, which reports to the secretary of the Research and Analysis Wing. The SFF initially comprised Tibetan recruits, drawn from refugees who had fled to India in 1959. Its primary mission was to perform covert operations behind Chinese lines, but it has since been used as a paramilitary force and operates as a regular army unit. Nyima’s death was controversial because the Bharatiya Janata Party leader Ram Madhav tweeted about his last rites, confirming the involvement of India-based Tibetans against the PLA. As this had the potential to further rile up China, Madhav subsequently deleted his post.

The PLA’s response was equally swift. It began moving troops toward the Kailash Range. While they were at lower heights than the Indian soldiers, “if they were to come up in strength and try to outflank or surround our localities, then we would have to take action,” Naravane writes. “The situation was tense and nearing breaking point.” At 5.30 pm, the PLA requested a flag meeting at the Chushul–Moldo Meeting Point, signalling a potential breakthrough. HS Gill, a brigade commander, attended the meeting, which lasted till 11 pm. The Chinese representative, Naravane recalls, said that the two armies should “abide by the strategic guidance of our leaders, that they don’t want war and that we should freeze all movement till the next SHMCL (Corps Commanders) meeting.” When Gill said that the PLA’s actions contradicted this stance, “he said that he would try his best to contain the situation but that since these troops were ‘from the outside’, it was proving to be difficult.”

By 31 August, the Chinese were probing Indian positions, which had prepared field defences and laid barbed wire, about fifty metres ahead, which was meant to be the Red Line—if the PLA breached it, Indian soldiers would open fire in self-defence. In the Kailash Range, a PLA company came within thirty-five metres of the field defences set up by the 13 Mahar regiment at 2 pm, firing two rounds into the air and demanding that the Indian soldiers dismantle their fortifications. “When the PLA tried to cross the barbed wire, we too fired three shots to more telling effect,” Naravane writes. The Chinese withdrew, after what were possibly the first shots exchanged by the two armies in eastern Ladakh since 1962, but the situation was already crackling with the possibility of escalation. The PLA deployed its tanks towards Rechin La, but Naravane’s call defused the situation before it got out of hand.

NEGOTIATIONS DURING EARLIER crises on the India–China border, such as the Depsang standoff in 2013, Chumar in 2014 and Doklam in 2017, were conducted primarily by diplomats. Military commanders coordinated locally, but it was officials in Beijing and New Delhi who negotiated the way out. The crisis of 2020 marked a break from this pattern.

That summer, at the PLA’s suggestion, India had accepted a new mechanism: Senior Highest Military Commander Level talks, popularly known as corps commander-level meetings. Unlike the Indian Army, the PLA is a very powerful institution, much higher in precedence and power than the Chinese foreign ministry. This was to create complications, as Naravane explains in the memoir. The first such meeting took place on 6 June 2020 at the Chushul–Moldo border point, after weeks of escalating tension. India was represented by Lieutenant General Harinder Singh, the commander of XIV Corps, while the Chinese representative was Major General Liu Lin of the South Xinjiang Military Region. The talks lasted nearly twelve hours, punctuated by translation delays and private consultations. Both sides agreed “in principle” to disengage at PP-14, PP-15 and PP-17A, with the modalities to be worked out later through lower-level meetings.



Army officers of India and China holding a meeting on 10 February 2021.

Naravane notes a critical flaw in the negotiating process: there were no official records or minutes of the meeting. “The decisions arrived at were only in the nature of ‘in-principle’ agreements subject to ratification at appropriate levels on either side,” he writes. “This arrangement had an inherent drawback in that what was said and understood by either party could be at variance based on individual perceptions, and there was no method to protect against any retraction from what had been agreed upon ‘in-principle’. This was to have grave repercussions later on.” When the issue of maintaining records was first raised, he adds, the foreign ministry was reluctant, since “border talks came under their remit.” It was only by the ninth round, in January 2021, that minutes were formally signed. Until then, “in the absence of proper records or minutes, it was difficult to move forward.”

The second round, held on 22 June 2020—just a week after the Galwan clash—exposed the depth of disagreement. The PLA pushed for partial pullbacks, but India pushed for a return to the April 2020 status quo. New Delhi then insisted on holding meetings between Indian and Chinese

diplomats, under the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination, before or after each military round. This, Naravane notes, “would enable us to project our point in a more formal and institutionalized manner with the added advantage that minutes of the WMCC meetings were on record.”

These positions were subsequently reversed, with China refusing to even consider de-escalation, a position it still maintains. Disengagement refers to the local, tactical separation of opposing troops at face-off points, including pulling soldiers back, creating buffer zones and removing immediate face-offs, while de-escalation refers to the wider drawdown and thinning of forces and heavy weapons from the operationally alert posture, reducing the overall level of mobilisation and threat, not just at one or two standoff spots. “Both sides prepared their respective proposals based on their viewpoints, but nothing much changed on ground,” Naravane writes, observing that the PLA simultaneously “continued improving their posture, building shelters and field defences, which was a sure indication of their long-term intent.”

Another critical issue emerged in the second round: the reference point for disengagement. India and China have long disagreed on where the LAC lies, with significant differences in at least a dozen areas. Since both sides broadly agreed to “fall back,” the question was, from where? The choice mattered, because it would establish the extent of control exercised on the ground and potentially “become a benchmark for any future border settlement.” The impact on future border negotiations is of immense significance and underscores the value of Naravane’s revelations. Naravane and the director general of military operations devised an innovation: two reference points, one for each side, with both armies retreating an equal distance from their own positions. Instead of fighting over a single line that would permanently define the border, each side would use its own reference point and retreat equally from it. Approved by the CSG, this approach avoided fixing a single contested line, but it carried an unspoken cost. First, India accepted the Chinese claims of the LAC for the first time, by including its version as a reference point. Second, the buffer zones it

created meant Indian patrols would no longer access areas they had routinely patrolled before May 2020. This became the Galwan model, which was employed in other disengagement proposals as well.

Naravane writes that “the PLA also seemed to be on board” during the third round, on 30 June. It agreed to both sides pulling back five kilometres from their reference points. The space in between—the site of the 15 June clash —“was to become a buffer zone,” inaccessible to both armies. While speaking in parliament, in December 2024, Jaishankar used a convoluted description to avoid saying “buffer zones.” This was a phrase Naravane has no problem using. “In a few other places where friction occurred in 2020, steps of a temporary and limited nature were worked out, based on local conditions, to obviate the possibility of further friction,” Jaishankar said. He went on to stress that this “applies to both sides.” But for New Delhi, what ought to count is the loss of control over the territory once its soldiers were no longer patrolling these areas.



Indian foreign minister S Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, in New Delhi, on 18 August 2025. The Modi government has made multiple concessions in order to project a return to normalcy in bilateral ties, even as core disputes remained unresolved. INDIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY / AP PHOTO

After ratification via hotline, the disengagement at Galwan proceeded quickly. Within two days, the PLA dismantled its tents and vacated the area. But the Chinese refused to discuss the north bank of the Pangong Lake until it came up during the fourth round of SMHCL talks, on 14 July 2020. The Indian representatives, Naravane recalls, sought “a step-wise withdrawal of personnel, weapons and equipment to mutually agreed distances; as well as de-escalation, to reduce the overall forces of both sides in the region.” The PLA had made considerable changes to the landform and had put up a large number of shelters for habitation and administrative purposes, “including an outline map of China in the vicinity of Finger 6, large enough to be seen by air.” They had also moved forward their boats, used for patrolling the lake from Finger 8 to Finger 5, and built floating jetties. “We reiterated our stance that reversion to the status quo ante of April 2020 was the only way forward,” Naravane writes. The PLA, he notes, “once again expressed concern at our build-up and made five recommendations namely, de-escalation (not disengagement) along isolated areas; de-escalation to be based on mutual equal security (which was our stance); respect LAC claims; stop fresh induction of troops; and maintain good channels of communication.”

Positions hardened during the fifth and sixth rounds. India insisted on full disengagement and status quo ante; China focussed on “de-escalation” while objecting to India’s military build-up. In the sixth round, on 21 September, India began including an MEA official in its delegation, mirroring the PLA’s political commissar. This, Naravane explains, was essential because the “Corps Commander had to refer back on most issues, as agreeing to seemingly minor concessions in respect of Eastern Ladakh might have far-reaching consequences in relation to the settlement of the border issue as a whole.” Northern Command was not keen on it, but the joint secretary for East Asia became an integral part of the Indian delegation.

India had gained a tactical advantage on the Kailash Range by this time. The CSG meeting preceding the sixth round decided that there “was no question of accepting a partial pullback,” Naravane writes. The PLA’s

negotiating position, he adds, shifted dramatically at this point: they “changed their tune and started stressing the need for disengagement, now that the tactical advantage lay with us.” This represented a significant recalibration. The MEA official helped, as he would “quote exactly what had transpired in various meetings (between respective Foreign and Defence Ministers) and thus gave the Chinese no room to wriggle out of their commitments.”

There was no concrete outcome, since the PLA wanted to first disengage from the Kailash Range while the Indian delegation argued that the older issue must be resolved first. This meant that the disengagement would “follow the pattern of North Bank–South Bank–Kailash Range,” Naravane writes. Both sides acknowledged needing “a time-bound road map for disengagement,” though fundamental disagreements persisted on sequencing and scope.

In the seventh round, on 12 and 13 October, the Chinese delegation also included a representative from the ministry of oceanic and border affairs. The PLA, Naravane recalls, proposed starting from the south bank and the Kailash Range, where India held advantages, which “was totally unacceptable to us on two counts, first, it started from the South Bank (as we had anticipated) and second, the pullback they were suggesting on the North Bank was not only partial but weighted heavily in their favour.” The Indian delegation had assessed that the “only leverage we had was the Kailash Range and once that was given up, the PLA would then find some excuse or the other and renege on their commitments for the North Bank.” Instead, India proposed commencing disengagement from the North Bank, offering token pullbacks on the Kailash Range as good faith. The proposal “put them in a tizzy,” Naravane recalls, and, despite a lack of outcome, it meant progress since “at least the cards were on the table and there was a starting point for future negotiations and the narrowing-down of differences.” The Indian delegation advocated for the Galwan Model, which had kept that area friction-free since 6 July.

In the eighth round, on 6 November, there was again no breakthrough, but “specifics of a road map towards disengagement were spelt out.” The

Chinese wanted to delink restoration of landforms from the process of disengagement, which the Indian side rejected. “If the infrastructure remained, it would make it that much easier to rush back and re-occupy the vacated areas,” Naravane explains. By the ninth round, on 24 January 2021, the PLA agreed to withdraw beyond Finger 8 and restore landforms—an unexpected breakthrough. For the first time, formal minutes were signed.

The CSG’s decision, on 27 January, to accept the deal—with the proviso that this was only a precursor to full disengagement—was political as much as military. Naravane writes that, while several issues remained unresolved, India’s leverage through its occupation of the Kailash range was not strong enough to force a full resolution, a proposition that has been debated ever since.

Moreover, the images of Chinese infrastructure on the north bank of the lake had become politically embarrassing for Modi. The choice, Naravane suggests, was to secure the visible 80 percent rather than risk losing everything while bargaining over the rest. In that case, these were not military calculations but diplomatic and political ones that should never have been the consideration of the army chief.

Between 10 and 19 February 2021, disengagement unfolded methodically and was broadcast worldwide. What emerged, however, was not a restoration of the status quo ante, as in previous standoffs, but a new geography of separation. Buffer zones—never publicly acknowledged as such—restricted Indian patrols in areas they could access before May 2020. When the defence minister informed parliament of the disengagement at Pangong, he did not explain that it was based on dual reference points. The Modi government chose silence over transparency, leaving the disengagement to be celebrated as success while its concessions remained hidden from public view.

Naravane’s account reveals the Indian concessions. The buffer zones created were monuments not to peace but to managed separation, while India had conceded that Chinese claims about the LAC were as valid as its own. It was a solution born from political necessities rather than the

requirements of the Indian military. The wait for a full resolution of the border question continues. Responding to a question about de-escalation at his annual press conference, in January 2026, the current army chief, General Upendra Dwivedi, revealed that the government has formed expert groups and working groups and that the Indian Army is “waiting for the outcome” of their discussions. Once these groups arrive at a “particular logical synergistic solution,” he said, the army would begin executing them on the ground. Dwivedi noted that this process “will take some time, and we are ready to wait.”

{FOUR}

IN THE AFTERMATH of the August 2020 crisis, a narrative has taken hold in strategic circles: that India’s occupation of the Kailash Range was a pre-planned operation—a tit-for-tat response conceived to punish China for its incursions in May and June. In this telling, Modi had merely been waiting for an opportunity to seize the initiative, using the army on 30 August to regain advantage without any immediate Chinese provocation.

This version has been most explicitly articulated by Joshi. “After due planning and preparation,” he writes in his 2024 book, *Who Dares Wins: A Soldier’s Memoir*, “we launched the Quid Pro Quo (QPQ) operations in the area of R2 complex (Rezang La–Rechin La) on the Kailash ranges, on the north and south bank of Pangong Tso and even further north in the area of Kiu La and Ane La passes.” Joshi, who now heads the Centre for Contemporary China Studies, an MEA think tank, claims that the Indian Army “completely took the PLA by surprise, brought them back to the negotiation table and forced them to beat a hasty retreat.”

Naravane’s memoir, perhaps unintentionally, pushes back forcefully against this interpretation. The operation was not premeditated but a direct response to Chinese actions. The distinction matters profoundly. If this had been a pre-planned quid pro quo, India, rather than China, would have been the aggressor. His dilemma over whether to open fire is further proof—if India had initiated the operation, perhaps it would have been

reasonable to escalate further, but if India was responding to Chinese aggression, the burden of first blood should rest on China.



Border Roads Organisation workers rest near Pangong lake. The lake stretches for roughly a hundred and sixty kilometres, with about a third in India and the remaining two-thirds in Tibet.

The distinction defines how India's strategic establishment understood what had just happened. It was worried about provoking China by undertaking any proactive military action. "Look, they are the bigger economy," Jaishankar told ANI, in 2023. "What am I going to do? As a smaller economy, I am going to pick up a fight with the bigger economy? It is not a question of being reactionary, it's a question of common sense."

Naravane's memoir also reveals the government's intense preoccupation with media coverage of the Ladakh crisis. The first indication comes from his private meetings with Jaishankar, held without aides or staff officers. In one such meeting, Naravane recalls, Jaishankar said that he was "very concerned and perturbed" about leaks to the media regarding discussions with China. Naravane was "even more concerned," since such leaks affected military negotiations directly. He assured the minister that the army was

not the source, pointing out that there were “far too many attendees” at the CSG meetings and that, despite clear orders restricting mobile phones in the military operations directorate, “some of the senior DGs and Secretaries were non-compliant.” He recalls raising the issue during his bimonthly meeting with Modi, on 10 November 2020. After briefing the prime minister on eastern Ladakh and the progress of talks, he warned Modi that leaks were jeopardising negotiations, with the PLA “often retracting from what had been discussed” because it believed India was trying to corner it through “motivated leaks.” Naravane does not record Modi’s response.

By January 2021, the concern over leaks had prompted what Naravane describes as a “need-to-know” meeting of a mini-CSG at Rajnath’s residence, attended by Jaishankar, Doval and Naravane, as well as the foreign secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla; the joint secretary for East Asia, Naveen Srivastava; and the director general of military operations, Lieutenant General Paramjit Singh Sangha. The trigger, Naravane writes, was that the outcomes of the eighth and ninth rounds of the SHMCL talks had appeared in the media within days, even as negotiations were ongoing. “This had been a recurring headache and a matter of concern,” he notes, “as it had the potential to derail the talks.” He claims that the PLA had complained many times to the Indians that “even before they had had the opportunity to debrief their higher-ups, the news was already on all our TV channels.” Indian military officers had to repeatedly explain that “we are a democracy with a free and open media, and that they would have to bear with us.”

The invocation of a “free and open media” does not fit with India’s present reality. Modi has not held a single press conference during his tenure and has only given interviews to pliant outlets, with his office vetting the edits. Naravane writes that he reiterated in the January 2021 meeting that, if the leaks were so damaging, “the office of the NSA had all the resources to be able to pinpoint the leak.” He adds that “the NSA must have looked into it, because there were no more leaks after that.” Whether this says more about Doval’s role in managing press coverage or about the media’s willingness to be managed is open to interpretation. What is clear is that, given the near-

total silence around the explosive revelations in Naravane's unpublished memoir, despite its circulation since 2023, the claim that television news was disclosing uncomfortable truths the government sought to suppress now appears doubtful.

IN EARLIER BORDER CRISES with China, India had insisted on a return to the status quo ante. This included destroying any new infrastructure, returning to old military deployment and exercising extant patrolling rights. All of these were dispensed with in eastern Ladakh. A weird justification for abandoning a strict insistence on the status quo ante appears in Naravane's account of a conversation with Jaishankar, who, he writes, argued against an early resolution.

The longer negotiations dragged on, Jaishankar suggested, the better it would be for India: positions held would gradually harden into a "new status quo," mirroring China's own strategy along its land and maritime borders. India, he said, should be prepared to maintain forward deployments not just through the winter but "for as long as it takes, even years," invoking the prolonged resolution of the Sumdorong Chu crisis of 1987. This thinking, Naravane notes, directly shaped India's decision to build infrastructure for a "long haul."

The argument rests on a flawed premise: that time inherently favours India. The post-2020 reality suggests the opposite. In 1987, India and China were closer in relative power. Today, the asymmetry is stark. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, China's economic, technological and infrastructural advantages have widened dramatically. As the structurally stronger power—operating on easier terrain, with superior border infrastructure—the PLA is far better positioned to convert "semi-permanent" deployments into durable facts on the ground and to wait out India diplomatically and militarily. India, by contrast, bears a disproportionate burden sustaining expensive, high-altitude forward positions with more limited resources. China has already halved the number of its own forces in eastern Ladakh and moved civilians closer to the border, to villages near the Pangong Lake.

The Economist reported, in December 2025, after being given access to eastern Ladakh, that “the number of Chinese structures along the LAC has risen ten-fold since Galwan.” India might be constructing some infrastructure, but, it quotes an officer as saying, “China’s rate of infrastructure development, swelled by larger budgets, is at least four times that of India.” Satellite imagery shows that China is constructing new buildings near the buffer zone. While the activity is within Chinese-held territory, it consolidates the PLA’s physical presence and subtly recalibrates Beijing’s territorial claims.

Time, in other words, works for Beijing. It can wait, offer selective disengagements, legitimise incremental gains and steadily erode New Delhi’s political resolve. This dynamic was on display during Wang Yi’s 2025 visit to Delhi, during which the Modi government made multiple concessions in order to project a return to normalcy in bilateral ties, even as core disputes remained unresolved. The prolonged standoff also ties down Indian military resources, constraining New Delhi’s ability to focus on the Indo-Pacific or to deal with challenges posed by Pakistan. So constrained are India’s resources, a Western official told *The Economist*, that it had to divert two brigades from the LAC to the Pakistan border during the military clash in May 2025.

Naravane’s revelations expose a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the Modi government’s China strategy—one obscured by tactical bombast but evident in the memoir’s unflinching operational detail. The government claims deterrence through military repositioning and infrastructure investment. In practice, it has presided over strategic retreat, cloaked in nationalist rhetoric and enforced by information control.

Consider the reality on the ground. India has given up winter grazing areas and established buffer zones that functionally concede contested territory without formal written agreements. The infrastructure gap, China’s singular advantage in a militarised frontier, has only widened. Aksai Chin, on the Chinese side of the LAC, is a plateau. The flat terrain allows the PLA to mobilise forces from rear areas to the border in only two nights, much faster than India can. PLA refuses to discuss de-escalation based on the principle

of time needed for mobilisation, while the Modi government hides behind the cloak of “peace and tranquillity” on the borders to pretend a return to normalcy. Meanwhile, the disengagement protocols themselves remain classified, shielded from parliamentary scrutiny or democratic accountability. When democratic oversight becomes strategically inconvenient, the Modi government simply redacts it from public view. This is not prudent security management. It is the management of perception to mask major concessions.

More damning is the political abdication exposed during the August 2020 crisis. The precedent set by Modi in handing historic responsibility to an army chief is corrosive. It establishes that, when pressure peaks, India’s civilian leadership retreats into operational ambiguity rather than strategic clarity. Xi would have noted this with satisfaction.

The structural problems in India–China relations persist because successive governments have evaded foundational questions rather than confronting them. The Vajpayee government’s 2003 formulation recognising Tibet as part of China proved diplomatically hollow, as Beijing’s renaming of Arunachal Pradesh as “Southern Tibet” later demonstrated. The 2020 disengagement framework repeated the error: it conceded language and mechanisms that constrained Indian flexibility while legitimising Chinese claims, without demanding clarity on the LAC—the prerequisite for any durable settlement. India and China may have lowered the risk of a clash in the region, but any disruption to the fragile peace could throw ties back into disarray.

This is something the people of the country seem to understand much more than the government. In a 2025 survey by Pew Research, a third of Indian respondents said that China poses the greatest threat to India, while 46 percent said that the territorial disputes between the two countries are a very serious problem—almost identical to the figure in a 2016 survey. China’s military power was also labelled very serious or somewhat serious a problem by two-thirds of respondents.

The asymmetry is not merely military. It is epistemological. China reportedly used drones to probe the Indian border during the India–Pakistan clash of May 2025. It views unsettled borders as permanent pressure points, while India views them as irritants to be managed through neighbourly good conduct. These are incompatible frameworks. No amount of summit-level diplomacy without extensive preparatory work resolves this incompatibility.

Modi has invested considerable political capital in personal engagement with Xi and has made zero progress on core issues. During the May 2025 clash, Pakistan not only deployed Chinese weapons systems but also relied on China's space-based intelligence collection, targeting inputs, data-processing and cyber activity. Beijing also provided diplomatic and narrative support. Lieutenant General Rahul R Singh, the deputy army chief, publicly claimed that Pakistan “was getting live inputs from China” about Indian movements. The Modi–Xi summits were thus performative, useful for domestic consumption but barren for substantive negotiation.

Naravane ends his memoir on a note of guarded confidence, arguing that India has moved from “dissuasive deterrence” to “credible deterrence” and that the PLA must now recognise the improbability of a military solution. But this assumes Beijing ever sought one. Even on Taiwan—a far higher political priority—China has so far relied on pressure, not war. Its strategy toward India appears similar: sustained coercion without escalation. The real gap, then, is not merely in military or diplomatic capability but in political will. Naravane's restraint on 31 August 2020 may have been operationally sound, but Modi's refusal to own the decision was not. Deterrence without political resolve is performance, not strategy. It signals weakness that will invite continued Chinese probing.

India's path forward requires acknowledging what the Modi government has consistently avoided: China does not regard India as an equal and negotiates accordingly. From its point of view, India sits far lower in the hierarchy of great powers than the United States. Naravane floats the idea of a non-aggression pact as a confidence-building measure, but such an agreement is politically implausible—and, tellingly, neither side is willing

to propose it. Without alignment between military capability, strategic doctrine and civilian decision-making, India's deterrence posture will remain asymmetric and operationally hollow. What remains really indispensable is political honesty.

The suppression of Naravane's memoir itself has become emblematic of this failure. A government unwilling to level with parliament or the public about how close India came to escalation in 2020—and how improvised its decision-making was—cannot credibly claim strategic confidence. What is being protected is not national security, but the illusion of control.

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